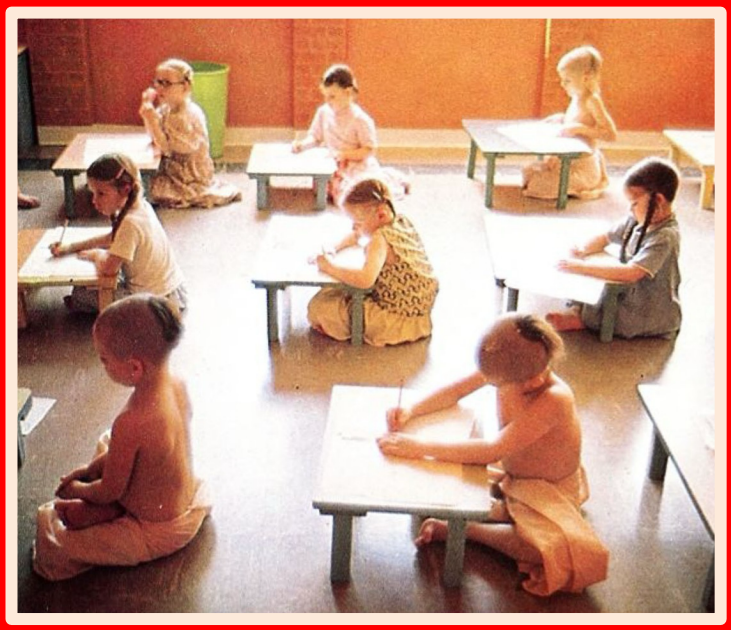
Varnāśrama *without* Gurukula? Just *a* Hobby



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Founder-*Ācārya* : His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda

EYE of the STORM

Varṇāśrama without Gurukula? Just a Hobby

by Kaunteya das - a member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness - Founder-*Acarya*: His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada

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For more books by the author (all free downloads): https://archive.org/details/@kaunteya_das

For more references to Srila Prabhupada on gurukula: "How to Mess up Varnasrama By Underestimating Women & Neglecting Gurukula" (free download): https://archive.org/details/how-to-mess-up-varnasrama

For a short seminar by the author on the theme of this book, presented in Zurich, Switzerland, in September 2025: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS3pe9vASLk&t=345s

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To all honest
men and women
who spent years
of their life
educating
children

Varnasrama and Its Natural Root

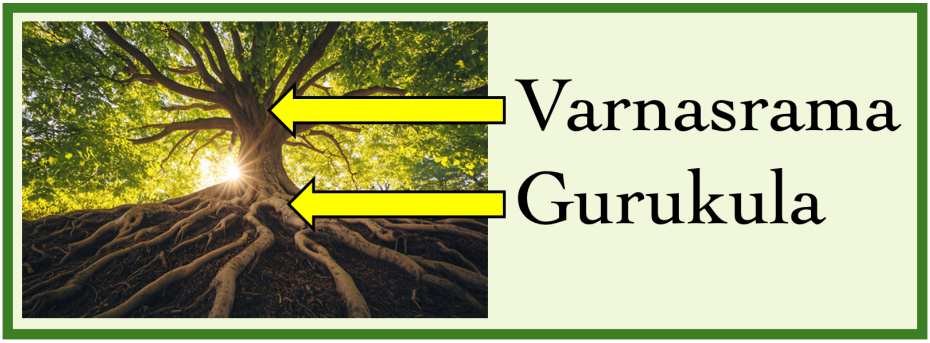
"You have to establish varnasrama," Srila Prabhupada said on a morning walk in Mayapur, on 5th February 1976. The message wasn't new, but he was then talking with his leading disciples, gathered for the yearly GBC meetings, and therefore his instruction on that day had a special aura of legacy.

For decades we have spoken and debated about varnasrama. Devotees have devised and imagined various permutations on the theme, but the uncomfortable truth has often not been clearly identified: without gurukula, varnasrama is just a hobby.

Let me clarify: hobbies are not necessarily bad per se. Some—like walking, swimming, or painting—could be both physically and psychologically beneficial; but most people can't make a living simply by walking, swimming, or painting. Similarly, dialoguing about varnasrama, visualizing a deep societal rewiring, a civilizational shift to align to Vedic values, can be a lofty intellectual exercise, but without identifying and practically working to establish the gurukula, the educational system varnasrama *depends* on, our talks are, to a large extent, just talks. Lofty, stimulating, even enthralling, but incapable of manifesting a sustainable varnasrama society in the long term. The Founder-Acarya of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada had clearly and repeatedly indicated the gurukula and varnasrama college as the educational basis of varnasrama vision. Without those bases, any varnasrama we envision would be like a construction build on sand.

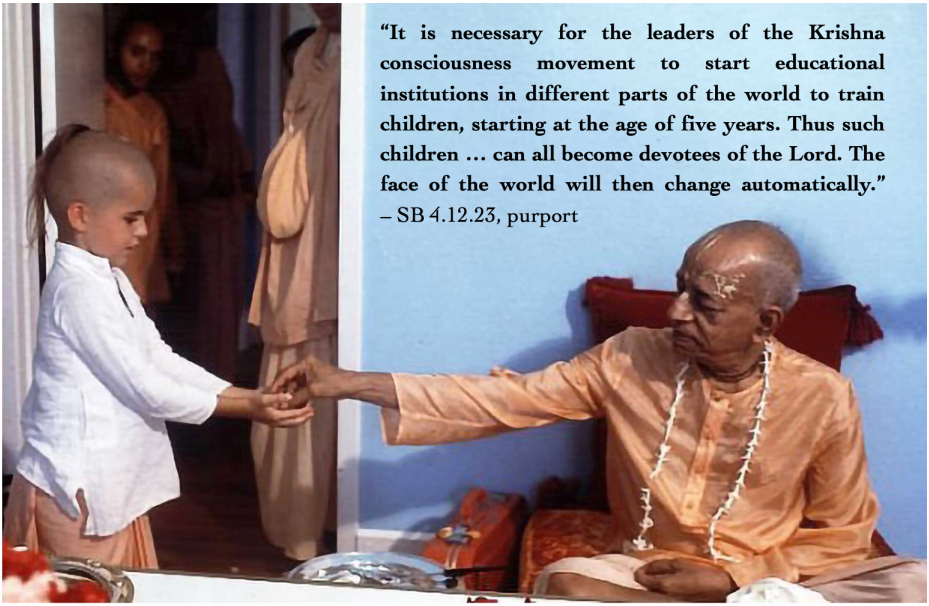
Every society, every civilization creates an education that forms their young to integrate into and perpetuate itself. Visualize a cycle: the society, say an industrial one, produces a system of schooling to prepare children to fit into its established dynamics (in this case training for factory managers, engineers, and other workers). The children thus shaped, now adults, operate and maintain the system, sending *their* children to the same educational institutions. This approach ensures that the supporting values and necessary skills are imparted to the new generations. For daiva-varnasrama to

survive—what to speak to create a beachhead within a hostile host culture—it needs the kind of schooling in which students deeply imbibe its worldview and fundamental sense of identity as an eternal servant of the Lord: *jīvera 'svarūpa' haya-kṛṣṇera 'nitya-dāsa'* (CC Madhya, 2.108).



Gurukula is the root of the "varnasrama tree." No root (or a very weak, wobbly one) and the tree comes crashing down at the first gust of wind. In Srila Prabhupada's spiritually ambitious concept, varnasrama schooling (gurukula and varnasrama college) were an essential aspect of his grand, visionary campaign: **"It is necessary for the leaders of the Krishna consciousness movement to start educational institutions in different parts of the world to train children, starting at the age of five years. Thus such children … can all become devotees of the Lord. The face of the world will then change automatically."** (*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 4.12.23, purport)

His sight wasn't simply on a Krishna conscious way to train the children of devotees; his idea of schooling was an element in his grand plan to spiritually revolutionize human society: **"Now you be trained up and revise the whole edition of the western civilization, especially in America. Then a new chapter will come in. This is the program. Therefore varnasrama school required."** (Morning Walk, Vrindavana, 14 March 1974). Two days before Srila Prabhupada had said: **"Everywhere, wherever we have got our center, a varṇāśrama college should be established."** (Morning Walk, Vrindavana, 12 March 1974). But, more than fifty years later, where are those varnasrama colleges, which Srila Prabhupada envisioned *in every temple*?



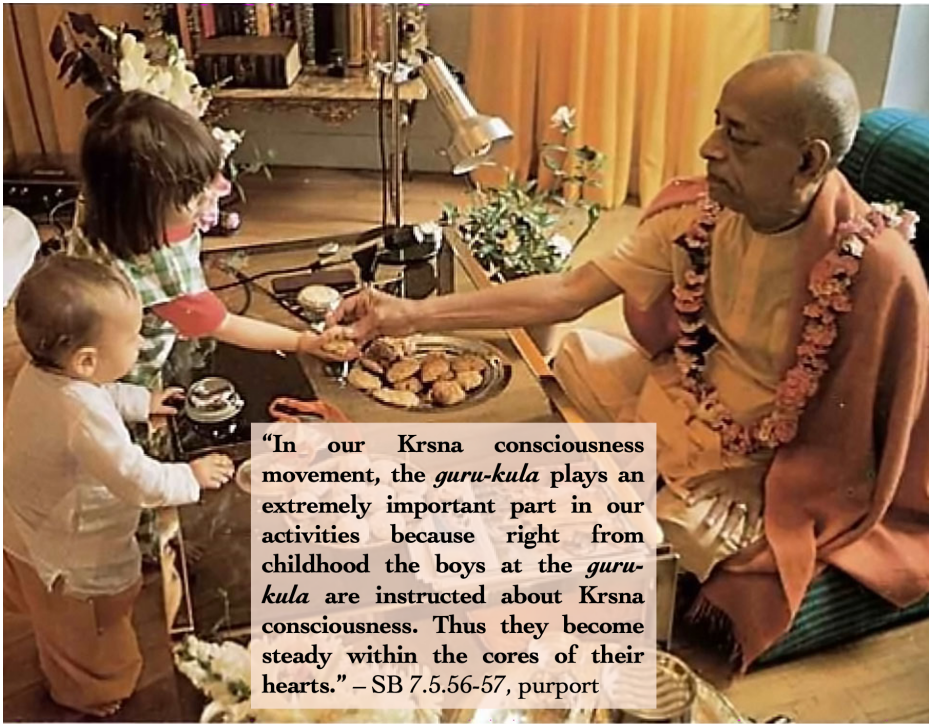
The Founder-Acarya's Repeated, Heartfelt Appeals

Srila Prabhupada consistently emphasized gurukula in conversations, letters, and books: **"Formerly … the brahmanas, ksatriyas and vaisyas (everyone but the sudras) – were trained in the guru-kula … There have consequently been many instances in which great kings and emperors have given up household life … they could give up all their possessions because they were trained early as brahmacaris."** (SB 7.6.10, purport).

This quote captures another characteristic of gurukula: it's not—as often in the modern days—merely a place where to acquire marketable skills. Gurukula training goes beyond, equipping the students to embrace detachment and renunciation after their economically productive years.

Srila Prabhupada's vision for his movement was clear: **"From five to ten** [or twelve] **years, guru-kula. And after ten years, they should go to the varnasrama college."** (Morning Walk, Vrindavana, 14 March 1974) First

the children should build character, a taste for bhakti practices, and a deep affective bonding with Krishna. Later, they would also develop their vocational inclinations: **"There is a Bengali proverb … 'When the bamboo is green, you can bend it, but when it is yellow, dried, it will crack.' So education begins from the very childhood. That is education. Therefore Gurukula is required … First of all character. That is Gurukula living … How to become sense controller, that is first education."** (Lecture on *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 7.12.2, Bombay, 13 April 1976)



"In our Krsna consciousness movement, the *guru-kula* plays an extremely important part in our activities because right from childhood the boys at the *guru-kula* are instructed about Krsna consciousness. Thus they become steady within the cores of their hearts." – SB 7.5.56-57, purport

If readers are somewhat uncomfortable with the term "gurukula," they can substitute it with "full-immersion Krishna conscious school." The essence remains the same, as Srila Prabhupada solemnly declares in the *Bhagavatam*: **"In our Krsna consciousness movement, the *guru-kula* plays an extremely important part in our activities because right from childhood the boys at the *guru-kula* are instructed about Krsna consciousness. Thus they become steady within the cores of their hearts."** (*Srimad-Bhagavatam*

7.5.56-57, purport) But this **"extremely important part"** has often been sidelines and neglected.

Further references

"Gurukula is our most important project." (Letter to Dayananda, Nandarani, 27 January 1973)

"I very much appreciate your activities for conducting our school to the highest standard of Krishna Consciousness behavior, and I consider your work the most important in the society because you are shaping the future generation of our Krishna Consciousness preachers, and this is not any small thing." (Letter to Rupa Vilasa, Candrika, Bhavatarini and Bhanutanya, 20 June 1972)

"If a child is trained properly in Krsna consciousness, he will never go away." (Letter to Bhanutanya dasi, 18 November 1972)

"I consider this Gurukula school to be one of our most important aspects of this movement and it should be given all serious consideration by the members." (Letter to Stokakrsna, 20 June 1972)

"If you become Head Master of the Gurukula that is more important than going to South America. This is the most important post in pushing on this movement." (Letter to Mohanananda, 11 December 1972)

I could go on, but you get the idea. And Srila Prabhupada's emphasis wasn't his own invention. Narada Muni states in the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*:

brahmacārī gurukule
vasan dānto guror hitam
ācaran dāsavan nīco
gurau sudṛḍha-sauhṛdaḥ

"**A student should practice completely controlling his senses. He should be submissive and should have an attitude of firm friendship for the spiritual master. With a great vow, the brahmacārī should live at the gurukula, only for the benefit of the guru.**" (SB 7.12.1)

The identity as a servant of God and of His representatives, central to true daiva-varnasrama, must ideally be assimilated in infancy and organically become the mainstay of one's consciousness and sense of identity. What other educational system can even come close to systematically engender this kind of self-awareness? We are blessed with access to the most advanced process of education, which can solve *all problems* at the root, but we hardly even talk about it (what to speak of providing it to our children).

"A student should practice completely controlling his senses. He should be submissive and should have an attitude of firm friendship for the spiritual master. With a great vow, the brahmacārī should live at the gurukula, only for the benefit of the guru."
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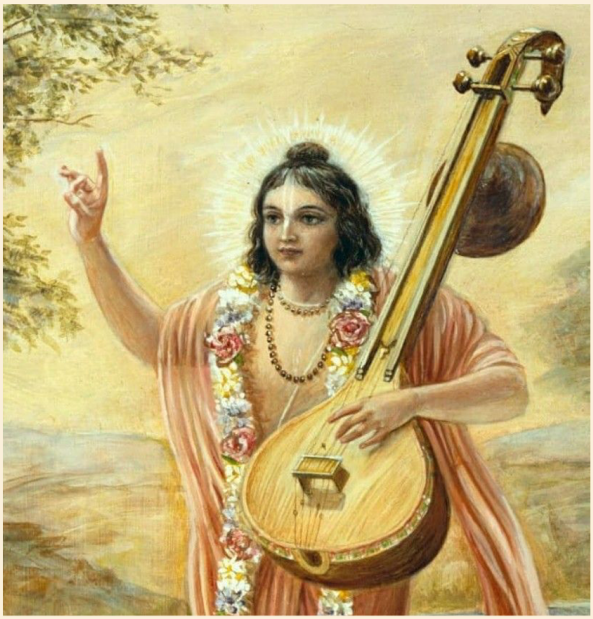


Although the first of the Seven Purposes of ISKCON is: "**To systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large,"** as a movement, we *have been* and *are* unable to **"systematically propagate spiritual knowledge"** even to our own children. And although the same First Purpose directs us **"to educate all people,"** we *have been* and *are* largely unable to systematically educate even our own children. Instead, we generally entrust them to the meat-eaters. All considered, by and large, as a Society we *have been* and *are* an utter failure in fulfilling the vision of the Founder-Acarya in this area; with the aggravating factor of not recognizing and not agonizing over the disaster. Only a few lonely voices even talk about gurukula. A problem—any problem—is exacerbated when it's not recognized as a problem.

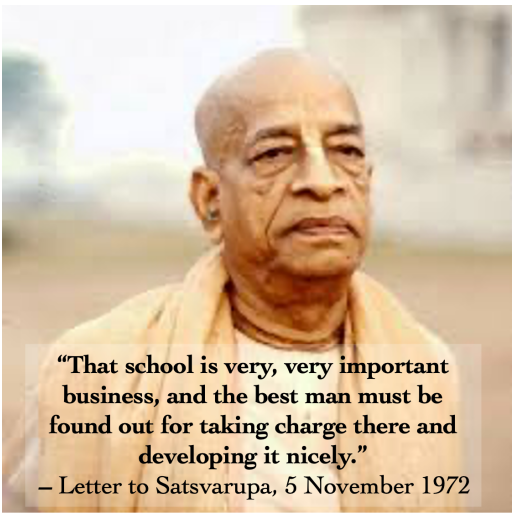
What Went Wrong?

Fundamentally, we mostly failed to apply the simple recipe Srila Prabhupada gave us:

1. Engage the best people in gurukula services.

2. Dedicate enough funding.

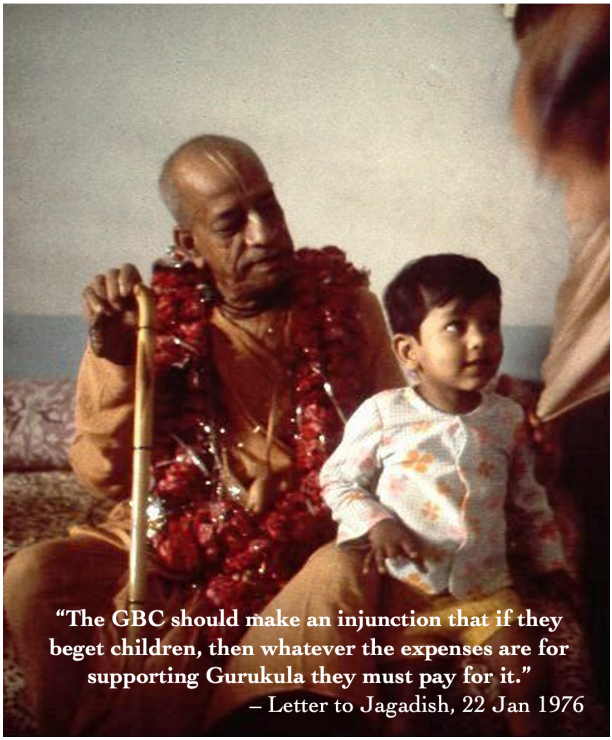
About the need for first-class faculty, Srila Prabhupada stated: **"That school is very, very important business, and the best man must be found out for taking charge there and developing it nicely."** (Letter to Satsvarupa, 5 November 1972). Also: **"We are getting so many sannyāsīs, they should teach. Teaching should be done by the sannyāsīs. Just like in missionary school, the Fathers teaches."** (Morning Walk, Vrindavana, 14 March 1974)



Sannyasis or grihasthas (or brahmacaris or vanaprasthas), men or women, the idea is that qualified, mature teachers should lead the schools. ISKCON gurukulas and varnasrama colleges should be manned by top-notch devotees. That's the essence of gurukula, the "guru" in "guru-kula." In the past at times the schools became the dumping ground of incompetent rejects; in some case those who couldn't collect funds, or were unable to sell books, or incapable of steadily hold any post, were shipped to the gurukula. The best men and women were engaged elsewhere; the children were offered the social scraps. Exactly the opposite of what Srila Prabhupada had envisioned and instructed.

Second, the money. Gurukulas don't need luxurious, indulgent arrangements, but the children must have enough (and quality) food; decent accommodations; proper clothing; adequate books and other educational materials; a protected environment; and outstanding healthcare. And teachers and their families should be provided with dignified living standards.

Srila Prabhupada was clear: **"All grhasthas who are interested in doing business should do so in full swing … let all the grhasthas who wish to, execute business full-fledgedly in the USA and in this way support Gurukula … The profits from the businesses should first go to support Gurukula and balance may be given for the local Temple's maintenance."** (Letter to Jayatirtha, 22 Jan 1976) So, the priority should be the schools. On the same day Srila Prabhupada also wrote: **"The GBC should make an injunction that if they beget children, then whatever the expenses are for supporting Gurukula they must pay for it."** (Letter to Jagadish, 22 Jan 1976) But those injunctions never fully materialized. Funding was just a sporadic, unreliable trickle, until, in many cases, it stopped altogether. We found (and still find) money for extravagant, costly places of worship worth millions of dollars, but funding gurukula generally isn't even remotely on the agenda. Srila Prabhupada's structural, foundational instructions on gurukula mostly fell on deaf ears. Some rare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– Letter to Jagadish, 22 Jan 1976

individuals may have taken them seriously, but as a movement we largely ignored them.

Why the Present Indifference?

If Srila Prabhupada was so unambiguously clear about the importance of gurukula, why the present apathy and suspicion about it? I identify five main reasons:

First - our past haunts us

Due to not applying the simple but powerful recipe of engaging the best devotees and providing sufficient funding, when we tried gurukula, the results have been often subpar and at times catastrophic. Some children had very positive, enriching experiences; while others have been mistreated in various ways, from neglect, to violence, to sexual abuse, generating long-standing trauma and estrangement.

As a result, for some devotees the very word "gurukula" has a radioactive ring, and they don't want to have anything to do with it, despite the clear instructions of the Founder-Acarya and of the *śastra*. It's unfortunate, because previous failures shouldn't dictate our future. Our tinted past should not be allowed to colonize and dominate our future. We should learn from the past mistakes without letting them affect the next 10,000 years, blinding us to the crucial need of Krishna conscious children education. Fear can create a legitimate cautionary feeling, but it shouldn't be allowed to paralyze us.

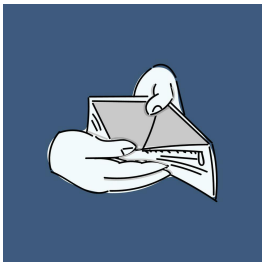
The irony is that our movement has experienced serious failures also in other areas, but we don't let those challenges shape our priorities. For instance, many marriages and families were devastated by divorce, but people still marry, and enthusiastically so. They don't stop marrying because of previous broken marriages. But for gurukula we use a different meter. Some seem to

think, "We had problems and failures; therefore we shouldn't even try anymore." A short-sighted and indefensible attitude.

Second - the "new-convert syndrome"

Most active ISKCON devotees are, sociologically-speaking, new-converts, having joined the religious group as adults. The unspoken conviction seems to be, "I didn't go to gurukula, but spiritually I am doing OK. Why would my children need gurukula? They will also be OK without it." This is a big miscalculation, a serious unkindness toward our new generations. We cannot create a healthy, Krishna conscious community, what to speak of a functional varnasrama, without aligning with the vision of the Founder-Acarya. Education is essential within every human society, what to speak of one aspiring to revolutionize humanity's culture! If we truly are a Society aiming at pure love for Krishna, neglecting gurukula is not a valid option. Forfeiting gurukula means cursing our future generations to a future devoid of varnasrama (and possibly of intrinsic bhakti).

Third - there is no money in gurukula



Vaisya-oriented devotees without proper guidance naturally focus on more lucrative enterprises. In varnasrama, brahmanas should teach in gurukula, while ksatriyas and vaisyas should fully support the schooling, including by sending their offsprings to gurukula. And to to establish a working gurukula doesn't take the same amount of money as the humongous projects we often build to attract the Hindus, in India and in the Hindu diaspora.

A gurukula doesn't even need to maintain a large group of teachers. One or a couple of intelligent, qualified educators, according to Srila Prabhupada, can run a school of hundreds of children: **"That is the way of Indian teaching, that there is one teacher, and how he's managing hundreds? That means there are groups. One who is elderly student, he's taking some**

beginners: "Write a or A like this." That he can teach. What he has learned, he can teach. Similarly, next group, next group. So in this way, one teacher can manage hundreds of students of different categories. This is organization." (Room Conversation, New Mayapur, 31 July 1976) Didactically this approach is very solid: when students repeat what they learn, they learn much more deeply. The system is scalable, flexible, and sustainable. But when there is no direction, people tend to concentrate on shorter-term projects. Which brings us to the next challenge, the next reason why there is so little interest in gurukula.

Fourth - gurukula requires *sattva-guna*

Nurturing children takes time, up to 20 years of constant training. Teachers need to belong to that special class of people enjoying acquiring and sharing knowledge, while remaining satisfied with simple living conditions. People equipped with the enormous patience needed to deal with children (especially someone else's) day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year.

Gurukula is not for the restless, the scattered, the passionate, or the emotionally unstable. It takes a level of goodness that is neither common nor systematically encouraged.

There are services that can be completed in a few hours or in a day. Cooking the *raja-bhoga* for the Deities is glorious, but people could do that, say, once a week and then move on with their lives. Gurukula is not like that. Children need stability, and the teacher and administrators should be the first examples of steadiness and dedication. But who wants to do that? Who want to dedicate their life to develop others? There are devotees of that nature, but they need tangible support—which at present is conspicuous by its absence. The mind wanders on so many shorter-term engagements—perhaps all noble and holy—but how many of them constitute the societal roots and cultural basis for a multi-generational revolution?

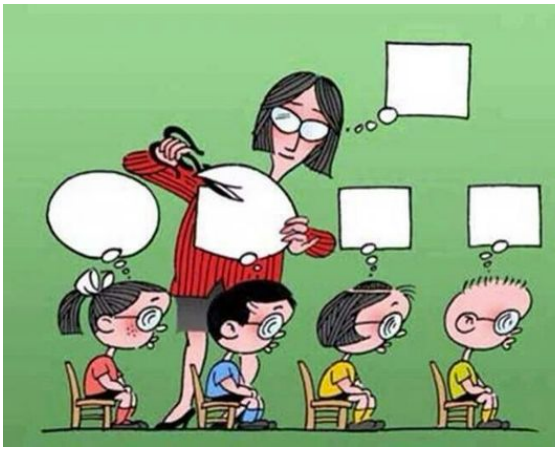
Fifth - lack of faith

Lack of faith is the fifth stumbling block to a culture embracing gurukula and varnasrama colleges. Lack of faith in the words of the Founder-Acarya, who stressed the importance of gurukula in no uncertain terms. That lack of faith is shown by the absence of emphasis. I often ask devotees: "In the last year, how many times have you heard speakers on the *vyasasana* talking about gurukula?" Often the answer is "zero"; sometimes "once or twice" Is this the sign of a (supposedly) brahminical movement serious about establishing varnasrama? Or it's rather the symptom of a group rudderless about education? It appears that the general attitude (implicit and unspoken) is "Nurturing the character and bhakti of the future generations of Vaisnavas? No, we have more important and urgent things to do."

When a country is devastated by invaders or is torn apart by civil war, the first aspect of society that suffers is education. For instance, I hear that an effect of the present Russo-Ukrainian conflict is that two of the four gurukulas in Ukraine closed down. Other ISKCON regions have been seriously affected by the departures of their traditional leaders and still partially hover in a "post-apocalyptic" mode, in which survival remains the priority. In the multiple centers where—for instance—the Deities' dresses are changed only once a week, broad projects for the future aren't even considered. I just concluded a tour of ISKCON centers in a European country that is still somewhat reeling and staggering after the spiritual demise, decades ago, of their main leader. In one temple they put the Deity to sleep for six days a week, "resuscitating" Them only on Sunday. In one important, capital city the small temple is only a rented place, and the owner is threatening not to renew the contract. I could go on, but you get the idea: in such a climate of instability, gurukula is not even a topic of theoretical discussion.

Once, talking with a sannyasi about self-sufficiency, he stressed the importance of *cultural self-sufficiency* above food self-sufficiency; how offering children education immediately attracts Krishna conscious parents and

families, spontaneously building a community, but how many devotees are willing to invest their lives in such an educational project?

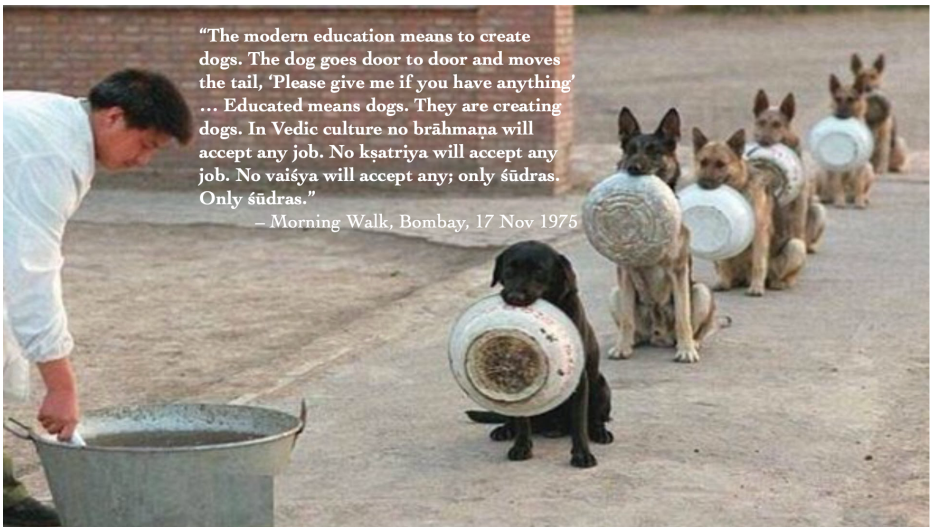


Another aspect of lack of faith (again in an intrinsic, undeclared way) is that we seem not to trust our children to be able to become more than sudras as adults. Srila Prabhupada was clear: only sudras psychologically and economically depend on getting a job: **"One who is depending on job, he's a sudra. That is not education … Unless he gets a job his education is useless. Therefore he's a sudra. And brahmana, ksatriya, vaisya – they will create their own means of livelihood."** (Morning Walk, Mayapur, 7 April 1975).

So many parents in ISKCON apparently believe their children can only survive if hired and employed by some firm, company, or corporation—and therefore they actively prepare them for that destiny: **"Yes. The modern education means to create dogs. The dog goes door to door and moves the tail, 'Please give me if you have anything.' So this educated person with application goes, and they say: 'No vacancy. Get out.' Therefore they are dogs. Educated means dogs. They are creating dogs. In Vedic culture no brāhmaṇa will accept any job. No kṣatriya will accept any job. No vaiśya will accept any; only śūdras. Only śūdras."** (Morning Walk, Bombay, 17 Nov 1975). Canine and brahminical mentalities don't mix very well.

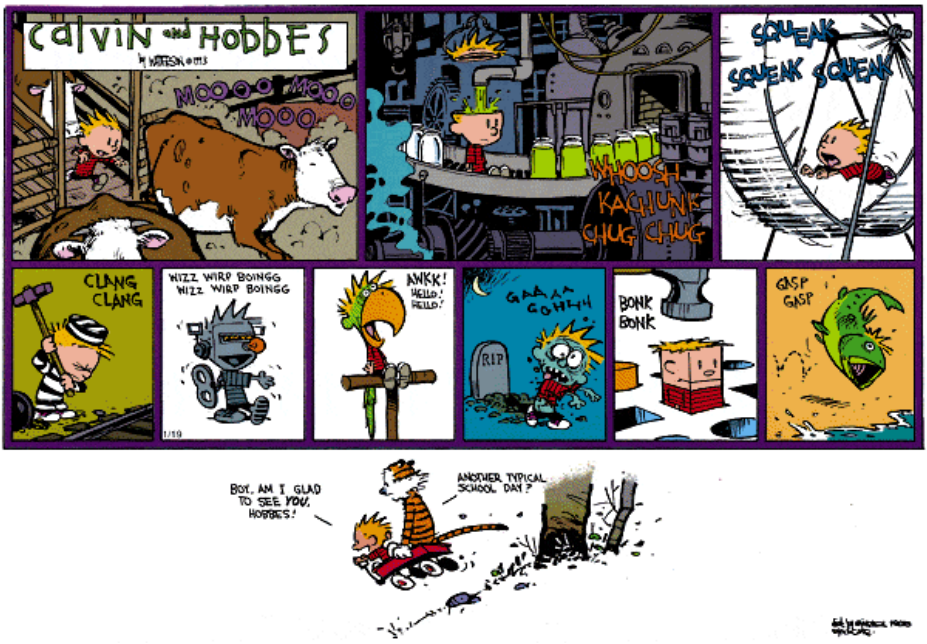
We can't keep outsourcing our precious children to sudra-producing institutes. **"So in this age, 99% people are engaged as sudra, working for others. No independence. Otherwise brahmana, ksatriya, vaisya, they are independent. They are nobody's servant. But at the present moment,**

education means how to become expert servant. That means sudra. So we cannot expect any good things from sudra." (Room Conversation, Atlanta, 1 March 1975). Certainly we can't expect sudras to build a functional varnasrama. They can participate in it, but they can't lead it. How many generations of our children we wish to sacrifice on the altar of mundane "education" before we shift our focus on establishing solid Vaisnava schooling?



Some parents seem to subliminally believe that Krishna won't arrange for food and shelter for their children unless their children become hired workers. Becoming a internally safe servant of God is different than developing a subservient, slave mentality toward some employer. When we consciously or unconsciously reject gurukula, we default to the so-called educational system of the materialists: **"There is no education actually. The modern education means simply a craftsmanship."** (Lecture, Melbourne, 19 April 1976). The basic message many parents seem to give their children is: "Spend your childhood and early youth subjected to the brainwashing of confused, disoriented individuals devoid of any deeper grasp of reality, bereft of philosophical grasp, people lacking even basic dharmic standards in what they eat and think. Acquire, my child, some marketable skills, and then go to wag your tail, hoping to find a master that will hire you. Whoever hires you,

of course, can also fire you in the blink of an eye; but that's life; sudra life." I am wondering: could our unenlightened parents, who have no faith that their children can thrive in the three higher varnas, represent the enemies of their children? Gurukula is not even on the radar for so many of our ISKCON parents. But what's the alternative?



The Slaughterhouse

Srila Prabhupada left no ambiguity about what he thought of the current educational system: a slaughterhouse. Even during a public program in the capital of India he didn't shy away from openly condemning it: **"Don't spoil your children. The modern educational system without any knowledge of Bhagavan, I may tell you frankly, not only in India, everywhere, they are practically slaughterhouse."** (Pandal lecture, Delhi, 29 Nov 1971).

In private his tone and tune didn't change: **"Everyone knows that sending boys to the school means spoil them. That's all. I have seen intelligent**

boys, they go to school and he is spoiled. Bas, spoiled. He learns how to smoke, how to use sex, how to talk nonsense, how to use knife, how to fight, these things … Simply slaughterhouse." (Room Conversation, London, 9 July 1973) And this was more than fifty years ago. In some ways the situation is much worse now. Srila Prabhupada mentions learning **"to use knife,"** but now at times pupils bring fire weapons to school (which at times they use to indiscriminately kill students and teachers).

Conclusion

I hope the message of this essay is clear: we are simply deluding ourselves if we harbor hopes for establishing varnasrama without establishing the schooling that forms "varnasrama citizens," especially of the three higher classes. At the end of the day, it boils down to the choice of following or not following the Founder-Acarya's vision of education. The alternative? Languishing in social mediocrity, civilizational irrelevance, and psychological dependence on the "system."

If we cannot deliver our children from the slaughterhouse and from a sudra destiny, what kind of "Krishna consciousness" are we spreading "all over the world"?

What's our step-by-step masterplan for creating varnasrama? Growing carrots and broccoli in a toned-down version of vaisya-dharma? Varnasrama without gurukula is like a tree without roots.

Srila Prabhupada wanted a civilizational rewrite, a Copernican cultural shift. He wanted his best followers to teach the children. He wanted the leaders of his Society working on long-term societal objectives. He wanted parents with faith in Krishna and in their children; parents faithfully aligning with the Founder-Acarya's vision and boldly investing in his idea of education.

If we want varnasrama, we must build gurukula. If we cannot build gurukula, then let us at least honestly admit that our varnasrama talks are just a hobby; an armchair distraction for bourgeois Hare Krishnas—for failed revolutionaries.

“Gurukula is our most important project.”

– Letter to Dayananda, Nandarani, 27 January 1973